

Thesis required for initiation
into Tau Beta Pi

THE HISTORY AND OPERATION
OF THE FERRY FORMERLY AT HARPER'S FERRY

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SUMMARY

The site of Harper's Ferry was first mentioned in 1719 in the chronicles of Virginia as Shenandoah. Thirteen years later, 1732, one of Hite's party, a German named Peter Stephens, settled at the fork of the Shenandoah and Potomac Rivers. He remained there until 1747 when he sold his title to Robert Harper, of Oxford England. Harper, being skilled in the erection of mills, immediately constructed one on his property and ferried anyone, who brought grain to his mill, across either the Shenandoah or the Potomac River, free of charge. The success of his undertaking may be illustrated by fact that he was able to pay all his debts in two years. The original landings of the ferry are lost but, the approximate position of one on the West Virginia side is well known. A more recent landing still remains directly in front of the old arsenal on Bolivar Heights. As the Valley of Virginia became more densely settled, Harpers Ferry was seen to be an important outlet to the Atlantic Ocean. In 1763-64 the ferry was recognized by the Assembly of Virginia and, Harper was given the authority to charge a ferry fee which he never did. Harper died after thirty-five years residence there and in his will desired that his successors should continue his practice of making no charge to those taking grain to his mill. The establish-

ment of the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad to the Wager Bridge across the Potomac in 1832 generally reduced the usefulness of the ferry and a little later caused its discontinuation.

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How long the nomad Indian tribes roamed, and lived in the proximity of the confluence of the Shenandoah and Potomac Rivers is not known, nor is there any accurate information concerning the activity of the early pioneers and settlers in this region of abundant game, and indescribable scenic wonders. Jefferson's appreciation of this splendor is given in these simple direct words: "This is worth a trip across the Atlantic to see."

There were pioneers who had explored this region before 1732, but it was not until then that Joist Hite and his party of sixteen families, of German extraction, cut their way from York, crossed the Cohongoronton, now called the Potomac, and settled in the country surrounding Harpers' Ferry, west of the Blue Ridge. Hite, recognizing the value of the land took possession of it according to the ancient Indian fashion of title, by virtue of the "tomahawk blaze." The grant of King Charles II to the Lord Proprietor allowed a certain acreage to each man. Hite, however, contrary to the letter of the charter, placed titles in the names of every man, woman, and child in his party. This practice soon resulted in controversy with Lord Thomas Fairfax to whom the original charter was given, and ended with a loss to Hite of one-third of his entries.

Peter Stephens, a member of Hites' party, was the first to settle in the Hole, the former title of Harper's Ferry, one very much unfitting the grandeur, but more appropriately describing the geographical formation. With his wife and three children he established his home, consisting of a cabin, orchard, garden and three acres of meadow. At regular intervals he was visited by a peddler, Peter Hoffman, who travelled from Baltimore to Frederick Town and down into the Valley of Virginia, exchanging his city-made products of lead, shot, powder, hooks and lines, for the furs obtained by the trappers. An intimate friendship existed between Stephens and Hoffman, they becoming known to the neighboring settlers as the "two Peters." It was the latter who was instrumental in bringing about Harper's journey to the Hole and his subsequent purchase of the place.

Robert Harper, after whom the ferry was named, was born in Oxford, England, in the year of 1703. His education was technical, along the lines of architecture and building. The Harper family, because of the high expense of such training, are believed to have been financially independent. He made his trip across the Atlantic on the "Morning Star," accompanied by his brother Joseph, who was skilled in the art of fancy wood carving.

His aspirations in Philadelphia, the city of his choice, were more than realized, soon becoming renowned for his improvements on buildings, and the experimentation and

construction of mills. However, after a period of more than ten years stay in the Quaker City, he met with reverses involving serious financial loss, which discouraged and left him with a desire to leave Philadelphia and return to England.

After paying his debts, incurred by the purchase of a parcel of land with a defective title, and by the building of a church in Frankford, he set out for the Valley of Virginia to construct a mill on the Opecon River for the Quakers of that region. After a week of travel he arrived in a small hamlet of a dozen houses called Frederick Town, where he first met Peter Hoffman. The latter, on the date of their meeting, arrived in the town riding one horse and leading two others packed with different articles with which he could trade the settlers.

Upon the inducement of a shorter route and wonderful scenery, Harper accompanied Hoffman thru a part of Maryland, now valuable as productive farms, reaching the river a short distance below the fork. He found his companion to be very amiable, and his conversation, showing the possession of sound, common sense and good judgment with respect to the future possibilities of the valley, made the difficult trip seem shorter and more pleasant.

Upon reaching the junction of the two rivers a marvelous scene presented itself in all of its premature grandeur. For a time Harper was astounded and speechless, never before having witnessed such natural beauty. To him-

self, he finally exclaimed, "O, thou Great Being above, whose hands but thine could have created so much sublimity and gradeur." There were seen the virgin forests with the growth of centuries jutting from the rocky points, and two beautiful rivers racing to meet each other only to madly dash themselves against the massive unyielding rock of the shores. Of all the places he had ever seen, he realized that this was best calculated to make him happy.

Stephens greeted the travelers warmly and at once began a conversation with much spirit. Although it was spoken in German, Harper knew they were referring to him as a great mill builder from Philadelphia. Anxious to see as much of the valley as possible Harper arose early the following morning and walked into the neighboring hills. Upon returning to the Stephen's home he found Hoffman ready to depart, his business with the neighbors finished. A suggestion by Hoffman opened the way for the purchase of the Stephens tract. Some few hours after bidding Hoffman farewell, Harper bought the land owned by Stephens and also the right to operate a ferry across the river, for the sum of sixty guineas (\$306.60). The title was transferred in the presence, and under the supervision of Esquire Hamilton, district magistrate and a native of Ayershire, Scotland.

Harper and Hamilton, after the purchase, became warm friends, the latter residing some three miles from the Hole. The name of Harper's Ferry was first heard when the

Scottish gentleman announced to the wife of Stephens, the purchase of their title. Robert Harper thus became the owner of the beautiful gap and gateway thru the Blue Ridge to the Valley of Virginia, and was responsible for securing the right of way and opening the highway that from 1861 to 1865 became famous, and made permanent the Ferry, that has since retained his name.

With the departure of Stephens, Harper wrote to his wife and brother in Philadelphia, informing them of his purchase, and of his decision to remain in his newly found Paradise. A general investigation of the possibilities of water power and logical mill sites was undertaken, so that the grain in the surrounding country might be milled.

Rachel Griffith, a native of Philadelphia, and wife of Harper, after a journey thru a roadless forest arrived at Harpers Ferry accompanying her brother Robert Griffith, a girl Barbara Klive, and three mechanics. A worthy costum of the neighbors, at that time, was to send to a newcomer household necessities requisite for the establishment of a home. The friendly neighbors, having been in similar circumstances themselves, realized the value of such aid and gave generously. Robert Griffith was given the task of building the mill and on the first of October, 1747, the following advertisement was posted on the trees:

Notice

"To the farmers in Maryland and over the Blue Ridge in Londen County. This is to certify that all persons bringing grist to my mill under the charge of William Griffith will be ferried across the Potomac and Shenandoah Rivers free of expense.

Robert Harper

Proprietor of the
Harpers Ferry Mill"

(Taken from historical data on Harpers Ferry.)

Harper's aid to the settlers was prompt even from the beginning for a period of not more than seven months had elapsed between the time of his departure from Philadelphia and the completion of the ferry and mill, thereby giving to the residents of the Valley of Virginia a means of access to Baltimore and also the advantages of a nearby milling plant.

Quoting Historical Data of Harpers' Ferry:

"The ferry--the nearest to Baltimore and the mill were both successful beyond his most sanguine expectations. As proof he paid off all his indebtedness in less than two years."

The following winter, 1747-48, being a hard one for the Harper's colony, required them to remain indoors, excluded from all outdoor activity and communications. The rivers were bound with ice, snow covered the trails and lay

as a heavy blanket on the peaks.

The rivers were still swollen when, in March, George Washington, George Fairfax, and three assistants crossed the Shenandoah to Harper's Ferry, and informed the settlers of their intention of surveying the tract of land granted them by Thomas Fairfax. Harper was surprised at the extreme youth of Washington and Fairfax, the former being but a trifle over sixteen years of age. Upon completion of the survey the party undertook others farther up the Shenandoah near the present site of Winchester. The responsibility of this important position was well placed, when given to the future president, for on many occasions the accuracy of these surveys have been proven.

By 1750 the residents of the Valley of Virginia were able to send their teams loaded with flour, pork and other produce over the roads, built by Maryland and Virginia, into Baltimore City, Harper's favorite market.

In 1763-64 Harper's Ferry became a "fixed fact," as the General Assembly of Virginia then holding its session in Williamsburg granted Mr. Harper a charter, establishing his ferry by law and fixing the rate of toll across--which rate was never charged.

Peter Stephens, being the first settler in the Hole, having come there in 1732, was also the first to operate a ferry across the Shenandoah and Potomac Rivers. His was simply a horse boat, which he crudely constructed

with his own hands. The recompense obtained was very small, because of the comparatively insignificant amount of material and people transported. The establishment of a grist mill by Harper in 1847 required a much larger ferry, and which size increased with the rate of settlement in the valley.

The importance of Harper's Ferry grew with the emigration to the Valley of Virginia and it was then considered the best route to the Atlantic. When the revolutionary war broke out Harper's business began to decrease rapidly because of the haste of the farmers to relinquish their agricultural pursuits, and lend their support to the colonies. Harper remained true to his native land, firmly convinced with the belief that the colonies were unable to fight off the yoke of subjugation. His ardor soon dampened, however, when he paid large quarterly sums of money as taxes to England. To escape from this duty he urged his wife, who generally took in all the receipts of the ferry, to bury the money. This benefited no one, for in the performance of some of her housework she unfortunately fell from a ladder and died the following day without uttering a word. His brother Joseph and his nephew Robert Harper Jr. died two years previous to that date. Some short time following the death of his wife his esteemed friend, Lord Thomas Hamilton, slipped thru a rafter, during the construction of Harper's stone home in 1775, seriously injuring himself and

resulting in his death. This house still stands, beautifully located in sight of his former ferry, and from the porch of which may be seen the passage of the rivers thru the Blue Ridge.

On October 2, 1782 Robert Harper died leaving his property to his niece, Sarah, who married John Wager Sr. whose descendants, two nephews and a niece resided at the Ferry. The niece Sarah A. Wager married Noah H. Swayne, judge of the United States Supreme Court.

Mr. Harper was buried, on Camp Hill, in a tract of four acres that he deeded to the town for such purposes. His grave is appropriately marked by a monument erected by his great grand nephew John Wager Swayne.

The following are extracts of the will of Robert Harper, October 1, 1782:

"1- I give leave and bequeath to my Nephew Robert Griffith, one Moiety, or half of my ferry survey----"

"2ly- I leave and bequeath to my niece Sarah Harper, daughter of my Brother, Joseph Harper jointer and cabinet maker late of Philadelphia, or her heirs my Ferry and Ferry House on Potowmack River, all the remainder of my ferry survey, not before devised, to Robert Griffith together with all my estate, right and title to the Maryland Shore of the said Ferry and also my Estate right and title to and for Ten Acres upon which is called Big Island up the Potowmack River adjoining the Ferry aforesaid---

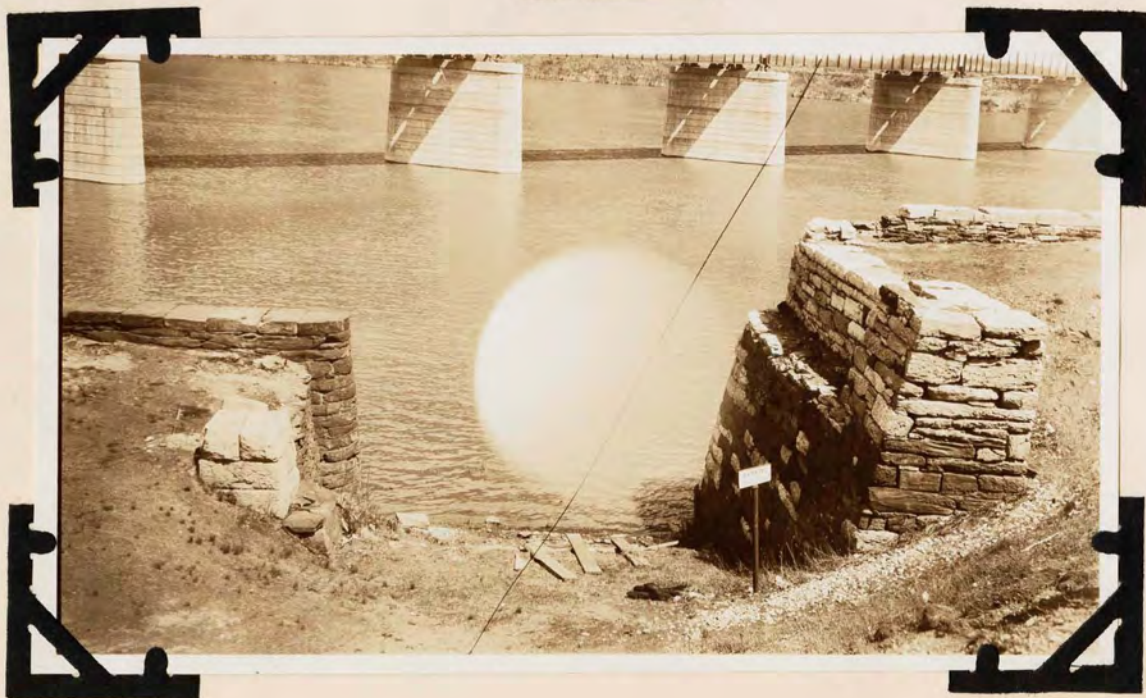
"3rd- It is my will in consideration of what is above devised and made over to my said Sarah that she, or her assigns shall be obliged to Ferry over at the Ferry above mentioned passage free every person or persons who shall bring with them ^{grist} guest of any kind to the Mills----"

The Baltimore and Ohio Railroad which pushed its tracks forward to Wager's Bridge in May, 1833 greatly reduced the usefulness of the ferry across the Potomac River. Connection was made with the short Winchester and Potomac road December 1, 1834 producing an immediate stimulus to the business of the road. The effect of the road thru the region, which it passed may be illustrated by the change in population of Harpers Ferry from 1,162 in 1830 to 6,105 in 1850. The population has decreased up to the present time now being but approximately 1500,



Left
Jefferson Rock--Boli-
var Heights, W. Va.
with Londen Heights
in the background.
It was so called when
Thomas Jefferson on
one of his trips to
the ferry inscribed
his name on it.

Below
Remains of the ferry
landing on the Poto-
mac. (W. Va. side)
after the establish-
ment of the Federal
Arsenal in 1796.



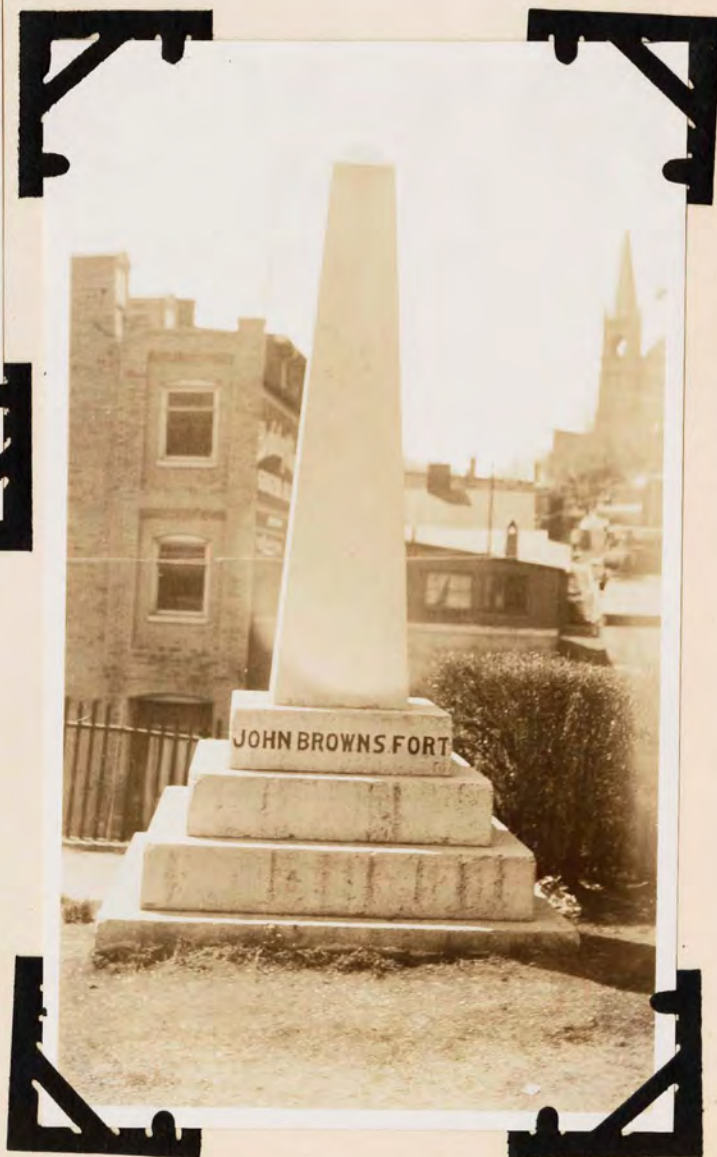
Robert Harper's House
erected in 1775 on
Bolivar Heights, W. Va.
The house is still in
excellent condition.





Tombstone at Robert Harper's grave, Bolivar Heights, W. Va., beside a large elm which has sprung up since his death.

The original site of John Brown's Fort. The old engine was removed for exhibition purposes to World's Fair, Chicago and re-erected on the grounds of Storer College.



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